Torrence notes high cost of dairying

Dennis Torrence is a businessman. Despite its pastoral appearance, his dairy farm is a fine-tuned business operation utilizing modern technology ranging from computers to solar heating.

"The level of profit in dairy farming has been dropping in recent years," notes Torrence. In order to maintain our profit levels, we have to become more productive, and more efficient. Everything we use in dairy farming--from equipment to feed and fertilizer--is going up in price, and most of it is increasing much faster than the price of milk."

Torrence's 265-acre farm, one of two dairy operations featured on last year's Virginia Farm Management Tour, includes a herd of 110 Holstein cows, 50 of which are currently being milked.

Dennis has been involved in dairy farming fulltime for five years. He and his father Elliott worked the farm together for two years before Elliott retired. Dennis had been an agricultural teacher before returning to the family farm, which has been in operation since 1898.

"With the cost of farming what it is today, one of the few ways you can get started is through a family operation," Dennis notes.

Dairy farming is expensive. The average investment, per animal, is between $4,000 and $5,000. And as in all types of farming, there are many risks involved, and the price of the product is never stable, although in dairy farming price is more stable than in other forms of agriculture.

These are the reasons that the Torrences have sought to have their dairy operation as efficient as possible.

Two computer services Torrence uses are the Virginia Agriculture Management Association, which costs $30 per month, and the Dairy Herd Improvement Association, which costs between $80 and $90 per month.

The Dairy Herd Improvement Association (DHIA) provides a computer readout with detailed information on every animal in the farm's herd. This information is useful in insuring that the animals stay at or near their maximum production levels and, consequently, that the farm earns as much as it can through milk sales.

Torrence points out that in 1960, dairymen's net profit over gross averaged 42 percent. In 1970, that figure had dropped to 24 percent. Today, the figure averages about 13 percent.

And the federal government recently placed a tax of 50 cents per 100 pounds of milk sold on dairy farmers. The tax is supposed to pay for the cost of storing surplus milk which is sold to the federal government. But many farmers in Appomattox County feel that the tax is not equitable.

"The midwestern and northern dairy co-ops sell about a third of their milk to the government," notes Torrence. "In Virginia, we sell less than one percent of our total production to the government, yet we are still paying the same 50 cents per 100 tax as the midwestern and northern producers."

Another problem facing the dairy farmer is that the more efficient and productive dairy farms become, the greater the chances that they will reach a point where production exceeds demand. "In some cases, we're finding ourselves producing milk faster than the public can consume it," notes Torrence.

But these are problems similar to those any industry faces, and they will be treated as challenges which the industry will meet and overcome on the road marked progress. It's doubtful that many dairymen will leave their farms because of government taxes or increasing production costs. "You have to like this business to be in it," Torrence concludes. "And as in anything else, you take problems as they come."

Booth's one-man dairy operation working well

(Continued from page 8)

about 50 of those animals at this time.

He has about 85 acres of corn planted this year. He'll make silage out of 50 acres of the corn, and use the rest for grain feed. "Last year was a good year for growing feed," Booth notes. "Right now, I'm about eight or nine months ahead on my feed supply."

Booth notes that corn silage and ground corn mixed with a protein supplement is the basic feed ration used by most dairymen. "The whole feeding program revolves around the corn crop," Booth points out.

He also grows orchardgrass clover and oats for hay.

Booth's operation consists of a "combination of the old and the new" in terms of equipment and facilities. He notes that he is comfortable with his dairy operation. "It's like anything else: you do and use what's best for you."

While he does hire help for harvesting his silage, Norman performs all the milking duties himself. His wife and his father feed the baby cows in the morning and evening. "I milked 16 cows the first time I ever milked in this barn," Booth says. Today, his herd averages 15,639 pounds of milk per cows per year.

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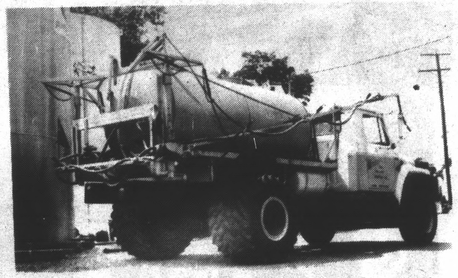

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Robinson enjoys life on the farm

Richard Robinson got into dairy farming when his father-in-law, Robert Martin retired from the dairy farm near Hixburg he had worked for more than 30 years.

Although Robert is "officially" retired, he still stays very active on the farm, helping with the many day-to-day chores which comprise dairy farming.

Robinson milks an average of 100 to 110 cows, and raises 200 acres of corn, as well as barley, oats, and wheat to feed his animals.

He recently completed construction of a double-five herringbone pit milking parlor, complete with automatic feeding system.

"The parlor saves on time and labor," Robinson notes. A hose for watering the cow's udders and the electronic milking machine apparatus are at about waist level to the person doing the milking, who stands in the parlor pit with the cows on stalls around the pit. A sensor in the milking apparatus detects when the cow's udder is empty, and the milker automatically detaches itself.

"This system suits our type of operation well, where we have a number of different people doing the milking," Richard notes.

If need be, the cattle can stay on concrete during bad weather, at their farm.They are brought from pasture into a concrete-floored holding area, then into the parlor for milking. They exit into a freestall area, then go to a feed bunk which is also under roof and has a concrete floor.

"If we need to, we can keep them in," notes Richard. "But, weather permitting, we turn them to pasture each day."

Richard, who also owns and operates Robinson Funeral Home in Appomattox, has a natural love for farming. His grandparents were farmers, and after he met and married his wife, Ann, he enjoyed helping Rob Martin on the farm.

"Rob had been a good manager," Richard notes. "He had a good operation, self sustaining and profitable. When he reached retirement age, Ann and I bought it."

Robinson notes that the farm keeps his family busy. "But we're busy doing what we like to do," he adds.

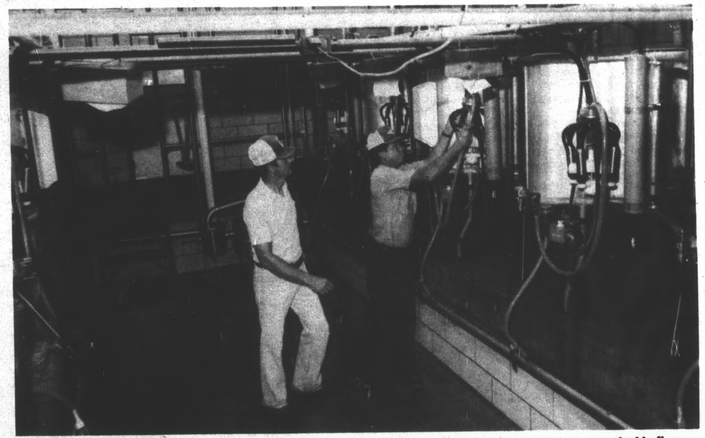
Robinson has a retirement plan for his employees, and has set up a hospitalization plan for his workers as well.

He notes that the recent improvements to the farm's physical plant, such as the pit parlor, have increased the operation's efficiency.

"The new parlor, which went into operation the first of last September, is saving us anywhere to an hour and a half to two hours in milking time each day," Robinson notes.

"The under-roof holding area is an asset too," he adds. "Right now we're very happy with the way the operation is running."

"We really do enjoy dairy farming," Robinson concludes. "You have to enjoy it to make it go."



RICHARD ROBINSON (left) and Thomas Scruggs examine milking equipment in Robinson's new double-five herringbone milking parlor. The parlor features a "pit" in which the person milking the cows stand, which reduces the time it takes to milk the herd each day.

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